

2ND AFTER EPIPHANY

January 18, 2009

1 Sam. 3:1-20; 1 Cor. 6:12-20, Jn 1:43-51

Introduction. Here's a trivia question for you: What lesson is read every year on the Sunday after Easter, the Sunday we often call "low Sunday" because of the drop in attendance compared with Easter?

Does anybody remember? It's the story of "Doubting Thomas," as recorded by St. John. "But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'"

In preaching on that text, pastors often mention the expression: "seeing is believing," and then go on to explain how this common human wisdom contrasts with God's wisdom and with the eyes of faith.

Today's gospel reading tells a story from the **beginning** of Jesus' ministry; and it, too, deals with seeing, and believing, and faith...or, perhaps more precisely, with seeing... and being seen.

1. The story of Philip and Nathaniel actually is the second half of a St. John's story about how Jesus found his first disciples. It begins with Jesus walking by the place where John the Baptist was standing with two of **his** disciples.

John says, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" And with that, the two disciples leave John and follow Jesus. One of these two was Andrew, who then recruits his brother Simon Peter.

That brings us to today's gospel story. Jesus leaves Bethsaida for Galilee, and there he finds Philip, who is from Bethsaida, and tells him, "Follow me."

And without asking any questions or doing a background check on this stranger, Philip goes off to find **his** friend Nathaniel. Excitedly, Philip tells him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth."

What happens next reminds us a bit of that other disciple, Doubting Thomas, at the other end of John's gospel. Unlike Andrew and Peter and Philip, Nathaniel doesn't "see" it. You can just hear go, "Hmph! Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

We aren't told why Nathaniel reacts so differently from Simon Peter, who believed his brother Andrew's report: "We've found the Messiah!"

But maybe it's not too much of a stretch to say that Nathaniel can't "see" Jesus because he is looking through clouded lenses...the clouded lenses of his own preconceptions. In most cases, seeing with your own eyes **is** believing; but not always; "seeing" **can** be a lot more complicated than you might think.

Take for example common typos and misprints in the service folder or the newsletter. I may read it over several times; but sometimes what I "see" is what I **expect** to see, and I fail to notice the error.

In a more serious vein, the same thing happens with human behaviors. How many times have you been annoyed or stressed by behavior you observe because you **think** you know what it going on, based on past experience, or maybe even prejudice? But when you look into it a bit more, you find out that you were wrong; and then, suddenly, it all "looks" different to you.

This is also can be true about our own behavior. Our vision is blurred by denial or self-delusion, by pride or ego, or the opposite: by insecurity or doubt....and we just don't see ourselves as others see us.

Given all this, it can indeed be very hard to "see" Jesus, because **his** way runs so counter to everything **we** have been prejudiced to see:

You get what you deserve.

Nothing in this life is free... you have to work for it.

If you don't look out for number one, nobody else will.

Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

2. Getting back to the story, Philip doesn't argue with Nathaniel. He simply repeats the phrase that Jesus has used with the others: "Come and see." And it works. Nathaniel follows him to where Jesus is waiting.

When Paula and I boarded the cruise ship in Barcelona last October, one of the crew members who was greeting everyone looked at me and said, "Is your name Paul... Paul Braden?" I was caught completely off balance and said, "Yeah. But I don't recognize **you**. How do you **know** me?"

We went back and forth for about 30 seconds, and then she laughed and pointed to my name badge. Here it was all a prank that she liked to play, and I looked gullible... Fact is... I guess I was!

But I tell the story because my **initial** reaction was to rear back and ask, "How do you know me?" And that's what happens in today's gospel story. As Nathaniel approaches, Jesus says, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" And Nathaniel's initial reaction is to stiffen a bit and ask, "Where did you get to know me?"

Jesus says, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” [And] Nathanael replie[s], “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Something wonderful happens here... Nathaniel believes.

But it’s not because he now can see Jesus for himself. Nor is it because, like Thomas, he can touch Jesus and make sure he’s real. No... Nathaniel is changed... by how **Jesus**... sees him. Being seen and known by Jesus turns this ordinary encounter into a life-altering experience.

Jesus consistently demonstrates this throughout the whole of his ministry.

An adulteress about to be stoned?

Jesus sees only a sinner in need of forgiveness; and instead of condemning her, he has mercy upon her and saves her.

A despised tax-collector?

Jesus sees only a fellow child of Abraham, a friend whose hospitality he is happy to accept, and a disciple-in-training.

A close friend who betrays Jesus when the chips are down?

Jesus sees only a friend, a faithful rock whom he trusts with the feeding of his sheep and the founding of his church.

Jesus sees the world in ways no one else seems to see it, and he calls his disciples—then and now—to see things the same way.

Conclusion. As you leave here and return to the ministry of your daily life, be assured... that’s how it can be for you...

when you remember your baptism...

when you receive the body and blood of Christ at the Holy Supper.

Jesus says, “I know you. My Spirit lives inside of you.

You are my very own sister...

my very own brother.

Jesus says, “This is my body... given for you.

This is my blood, shed for you.

I love you and forgive you and accept you... for who you are.

Being seen like that **is** a life-changing experience. And it gives you a new vision.

Now you can see what was right in front of you all along.

Now can you “see” other people in your life... in the same light as Jesus sees you.

And now you can love and accept them... for who **they** are.